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ABSTRACT

The questioning of hegemonic discourses has become an essential element in many feminist, afro-centric, and literary theories of discourse. Scholars in these areas have explicated various indictments of the phallocentric, eurocentric, and essentialist linguistic strategies defined and perpetuated by dominant population groups, and some have begun the difficult task of addressing the complicitous nature of hegemonic discourse. This essay explores the problem of complicity as manifested in critical discourses that converge at the juncture of gender, race, and language. The analysis suggests that these discourses maintain the hegemonic dialectic by and language. The analysis suggests that these discourses maintain the hegemonic dialectic by their adherence to an underlying epistemological principle of essentialist logic, the principle of negative difference, yet offer the possibility of an actively non-argumentative approach to discourse grounded in a rhetoric of definition. (Thirty-seven references are attached.) (Author/SR)

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Complicity: Reconstructing the Hegemonic Dialectic

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-Abstract-

The questioning of hegemonic discourses has become an essential element in many feminist, afro-centric, and literary theories of discourse. Scholars in these areas have explicated various indictments of the phallocentric, eurocentric, and essentialist linguistic strategies defined and perpetuated by dominant population groups, and some have begun the difficult task of addressing the complicitous nature of hegemonic discourse. This essay will explore the problem of complicity as it is manifest in critical discourses that converge at the juncture of gender, race and language. My analysis suggests that these discourses maintain the hegemonic dialectic by their adherence to an underlying epistemological principle of essentialist logic, the principle of negative difference, yet offer the possibility of an actively non-argumentative approach to discourse grounded in a rhetoric of definition.

Complicity: Reconstructing the Hegemonic Dialectic

The relationship between language and the construction of social reality has become an important epistemological issue in the critical stances of theorists attempting to explicate marginalized discourses. Beginning with the assumption that language generates as well as reflects reality, scholars in the fields of race, gender and contemporary criticism, have illustrated how the epistemological assumptions of privileged discourses reify ideologies of negative difference which lead to the socio-cultural disenfranchisement of blacks, women, and language. This disenfranchisement has, in turn, generated a radical critical sensibility that persistently calls into question the legitimacy of hegemonic discourses.

The questioning of hegemonic discourses has become an essential element in many feminist, afrocentric, and literary theories of discourse. Scholars in these areas have articulated various indictments of the phallocentric, eurocentric, and essentialist linguistic strategies defined and perpetuated by dominant population groups, and some have begun the difficult task of addressing the complicitous nature of hegemonic discourse. This essay will explore the problem of complicity as it is manifest in critical discourses that converge at the juncture of gender, race and language. By focusing on this juncture I shall illustrate how racism and sexism are products of a conceptualization of language peculiar to essentialist epistemology, and prefigured by the historical conflict between rhetoric and philosophy. I shall also suggest that contemporary race, gender and language studies provide the foundation for an alternative epistemic stance which could generate and facilitate actively non-argumentative discourse.

Henry Louis Gates illustrates the connection between race and language, and the concerns with which this connection confront the critic in "Criticism in the Jungle": "Ethnocentricism and 'logocentricism' are profoundly interrelated in Western discourse as old as the *Phaedrus* of Plato, in which one finds one of the earliest figures of blackness as an absence, a figure of negation" (1984, p. 6). Blackness as a figure of negation points to an *essential* difference, one intimately connected to the assumptions of knowledge in Western discourse. Steve Whitson illustrates the same problematic in his essay "The *Phaedrus* Complex." He argues that in the Phaedrus, "the philosopher has shored up his claim to a unified identity and relegated rhetoric to the negative pole of binary

oppositions that privilege a particular truth claim: presence/absence, light/dark, man/woman, truth/appearance, and philosophy/rhetoric. The terms for this kind of metaphysics is phallogocentricism: the primacy of the phallus and the philosopher's word as law" (1988, p. 18). The epistemological assumptions of both racist and sexist language can be traced to the essentialist presuppositions of language clearly evident in the debate between rhetoric and philosophy.

This is suggested by Richard Lanham's discussion of the "serious premises" which underlie Western discussions of style as it relates to rhetoric. "Every man possesses a central self, and irreducible identity. These selves combine into a single, homogeneously real society which constitutes a referent reality for the men living in it. This referent society is in turn contained in a physical nature itself referential, standing 'out there," independent of man" (1976, p. 1). The significance of Lanham's essay for the discussion of race and gender is his explication of the essentialist presuppositions of "serious" reality, and the resulting historical disenfranchisement of rhetoric by philosophy. The relationship between rhetorical and philosophical reality is grounded in, and perpetuated by, the same assumptions concerning language and reality that create the social divisions of race and gender. What Lanham calls "The Rhetorical Ideal of Life" constantly calls into question the assumptive grounds of "serious" reality, in much the same way that race and gender studies have challenged the legitimacy of hegemonic eurocentric and phallocentric discourses.

Thus, rhetoric is central to the contemporary crisis of epistemology characterized by race, gender, and literary studies that point to a reconstruction of the systems of knowledge that initiated and have sustained Western culture. The calling into question of privileged discourse is *ultimately a rhetorical activity*, and yet, within the context of the assumptions of essential knowledge, could easily lead to the replacement of one oppressive discourse for another. To avoid such an inversion we must begin the reconstruction of the hegemonic dialectic with rhetoric. "The contribution rhetorical reality makes to Western reality as a whole is greatest when it is most uncompromisingly itself, insists most strenuously on it own coordinates" (Lanham, p. 6).

In order to explicate this reconstruction from a rhetorical point of view, I will first consider the Marxist definition of hegemony in terms of linguistic and symbolic considerations that challenge its essentialist presuppositions. Next I will explore how these considerations are central to contemporary race and gender studies, and how they lead us inevitably toward the problem of complicity.

Finally I will consider how an understanding of complicity allows us to transcend the hegemonic dialectic through a rhetorical transformation of the underlying epistemological principle of essentialist logic, the principle of negative difference, a transformation which leads to the possibility of actively non-argumentative discourse.

DOMINANCE AND DEFINITION: LINGUISTIC HEGEMONY AND THE RHETORIC OF DIFFERENCE

In order to consider the problem of complicity we must first begin with a consideration of Marxist discussions of ideology and hegemony. Stuart Hall in "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism Without Guarantees" writes that ideology "has especially to do with the concepts and the languages of practical thought which stabilize a particular form of power and domination; or which reconcile and accommodate the mass of the people to their subordinate place in the social formation" (1983, p. 58). Ideology is clearly related to the structures of discourse and linguistic practices that characterize and define relationships between individuals in society. Ideological beliefs reflect assumptive grounds peculiar to particular epistemic positions, and these beliefs are maintained and reified linguistically, both by the socially accepted definitions of language, and by language itself.

Todd Gitlin concurs, and indicates the clear connection between ideology and hegemony. "Ideology is generally expressed as common sense--those assumptions, procedures, rules of discourse that are taken for granted. Hegemony is the suffusing of the society by ideology that sustains the powerful groups' claims to their power by rendering their preeminence natural, justifiable, and beneficent" (1987, p. 241). Hegemony is characterized by the use of language to legitimate and perpetuate privilege through persuasion, and is grounded in what I shall call a "rhetoric of negative difference." Hegemony assumes the existence of an essentially true, singular reality equated with 'nature' and understood through dialectical argumentation, that language merely reflects, but does not create. To the extent that critics of race, gender and language oppose hegemonic discourses based upon positions which subscribe to these assumptions, they become complicitous with those discourses, and in effect, reify them. "The decisive point is that hegemony is a collaboration. It is an unequal collaboration, in which the large-scale processes of concentrated production set limits to, and manage, the

cultural expressions of dominated (and dominating) groups. Yet it is a collaboration none-the-less"(Gitlin, p. 241).

Hegemony in the Marxist view is primarily a socio-physical phenomenon; it is a product of the physical or material environment, though not a product of language. Yet some contemporary Marxist theorists have suggested that symbolic and classificatory systems play a crucial part in defining the social realities which circumscribe the hegemonic dialectic. Kress and Hodge indicate that classification plays an important part in the construction of social reality. "Classification imposes order on what is classified. So classification is an instrument of control in two directions: control over the flux of experience of physical and social reality, in a 'science'; and society's control over the conceptions of that reality" (p. 63). They go on to suggest that classificatory systems are essential to maintenance of social division and struggle. "In this way classification becomes the site of tension and struggle--on one level between the individuals, as each tries to impose his or her system on others or gives way to superior power. On another level, the struggle goes on between social, ethnic, national, and racial groupings" (1979, pp 63-64).

Hegemonic discourse, to the extent that it is presupposed by classificatory systems, is the product of an underlying epistemic stance that constructs reality in terms of categorically negative differences: black and white, man and woman, truth and falsity. Kress and Hodge go on to argue that the basic catalysts of social change are extra-linguistic. "The dynamics of such changes come from outside language, from changes in the material, social, political, technological, or ideological environment" (p. 64). However, to the extent that language constructs these environments, it is imperative that the underlying epistemological presuppositions of the language/reality relationship be explicitly explored. This is precisely what Vincent Crapanzano does in *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa* when he explains the relationship between essentialism and racism: "Racism is, of course, one of the most blatant and potentially evil forms of essentialist thought, but often its critical consideration masks other classifications that have the same epistemological roots and permit the same social and psychological tyranny" (1985, p. 20).

Crapanzano begins with the assumption that Marxism cannot explain the complexities of race relations, an argument presented also by Willhelm's essay on Marxism's inability to adequately account for American racism "How to incorporate the nonmaterial element of racism within a materialistic framework is one of the basic dilemmas confronting any Marxist attempt to analyze black/white relations in the United States" (1980, p. 109). Willhelm

suggests a "perspective which can blend racism as a variable in relationship with economic variables," but is unable to offer such an alternative. Crapanzano's analysis of the South African situation gives some indication why, when he argues that "there is no vantage point outside the word given reality in which the white South African finds himself" (p. 28).

He continues: "There are some, to be sure, who have sought escape through self-descriptions that are cast in some ideology or other. Some vulgar Marxists have, for example, attempted to understand South African social reality in terms of class struggle. They have all too facilely substituted for a South African social category another, for 'Blacks' say 'lumpen proletariat'" (pp. 28-29). Crapanzano's assertion that language is the vehicle through which racism, as a manifestation of essentialism, is tacitly and unconsciously transmitted can be extended to the consideration of hegemony. Unlike Kress and Hodge, who, while recognizing the role of language in the perpetuation of hegemonic discourse, see hegemony as an extra-linguistic problematic, Crapanzano suggests that the "discourse of domination" that characterizes South African society is grounded in linguistic interaction. "The problem of language is central to the South African experience" (p. 28).

In his discussion of the "rhetoric of domination and subordination", Crapanzano connects essentialism with hegemonic discourse and the problem of complicity:

> Although racist and other essentialist social categories--when they exist--enter the rhetoric of domination and subordination in hierarchical societies, they are not as freely manipulated by the dominant, the possessors of power, status, and wealth, as is popularly thought. In the popular imagination, the dominant--"the establishment," "capitalists," "imperialists," "the upper classes," "the rich"--are often cast as though they were immune from social, cultural, and psychological constraint. How often is "the imperialist" characterized as a ruthless exploiter without a conscience! If he were only that, he would be far more successful in his exploitations. Such a view fails, of course, to recognize the constraints of the dominant. To be dominant in a system is not to dominate the system (pp. 20, 21).

Crapanzano's analysis provides a starting point for a discussion of complicity precisely because it isolates and illustrates the key elements of the hegemonic dialectic: language, thought and action, and the essentialist presuppositions that define and determine them.

In order to extend this analysis, we must first consider how theorists in the areas of race, gender and rhetoric are offering epistemic stances which allow for social and psychological redefinition, then examine how these stances reify hegemonic discourse through adherence to essentialist linguistic assumptions and practices, and finally explore the possibility of constructing an actively non-argumentative rhetoric which would allow for a reconstruction of the hegemonic dialectic.

THE POWER OF THE WORD IN RACE, GENDER AND RHETORIC

The calling into question of hegemonic discourses has been facilitated by the re-emergence of an understanding of the centrality of language in the areas of race, gender and rhetoric. The power of the word has been recognized by contemporary black theorists, feminists, and rhetoricians, who have offered an alternative to essentialist epistemology by explicating the role of language in the construction of social reality. These theorists have pointed to the eurocentric, phallocentric, and philosophical biases that have dominated human language, thought and action, and have explicated alternative epistemic stances to challenge and criticize these hegemonic discourses. These epistemic stances, however, when viewed in terms of their underlying assumptions, may reify hegemonic discourse by an adherence to principles of dialectical argumentation.

Contemporary Black Thought has offered "alternative analyses in the social and behavioral sciences" (1980) that have been strongly influenced by the notion of the primacy of language. Contemporary Black theorist Molefi Asante has placed a particular emphasis on the power of language as it is manifest in the writings of Janheinz Jahn and his discussion of *nommo*, "the life force, which produces all life, which influences 'things' in the shape of the *word*" (Jahn, p. 124). Asante's writings point to an "afro-centric" epistemology, that emphasizes language, affirmation, and methodological complementarity. He writes in "The Communication Person" that the "methodological pasture which the communication field must take is that all sectors of a society and all societies can be explored, analyzed, and questioned on the basis of their contributions to the

human personality. Any society that distorts, hinders, or damages the human personality must be called into question" (1980, p. 25). Asante is here referring to "eurocentric" societies and the essentialist social and linguistic praxes perpetuated by those societies.

Joseph A. Baldwin explains the distinction between "eurocentric" and "afrocentric" thought and action as expressed by a number of Contemporary Black Theorists. "On the one hand, it is argued that the European approach exemplifies a 'humanity *versus* nature,' or antagonistic style of operation, while the African approach, on the other hand, exemplifies a 'humanity-nature unity' or 'oneness with nature' style of operation....Consistent with these notions, it has been shown that the Africans seek to achieve a comprehensive understanding of nature to facilitate a more complementary coexistence with it" (1980, p. 96). Central to the afrocentric enterprise, then, is the calling into question of, and a separation from, the "eurocentric" epistemic stances, and this enterprise is grounded in the generative power of the word.

Contemporary feminist writings have also put a strong emphasis on language, the problem of negative difference it creates, and the transformative power it possesses. Mura and Wagner indicate the impact of the essentialist presuppositions of language in "Linguistic Sexism: A Rhetorical Perspective: "Language lets us know that, at least semantically, men and women are *entirely different creatures*, rather than being the male and female of the human species" (1984, p. 256, emphasis mine). In *Words and Women*, Casey Miller and Kate Swift illustrate the connection between women's language, race and complicity, when they amplify Gunnar Myrdal's comparison of blacks and women in Western society. They observe that "both groups have traditionally been assigned a "place" in a society dominated by white males, and both acquired traits, like submissiveness and self-deprecation, that helped to keep them there" (1977, p. 100).

Adrienne Rich points to the transformative power of the word when she writes in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* that "language can be used as a means of changing reality," and argues that the issue of language is central to the affirmation of "women's culture" as an alternative to male domination. "Women's culture," she writes, "is active: women have been the truly active people in all cultures, without whom society would long ago have perished, though our activity has often been on behalf of men and children. Today women are talking to each other, recovering an oral culture, telling our life stories, reading aloud to one another the books that have moved and

healed us, analyzing the language that has lied about us, reading our own words to each other" (1979, p. 13).

Anne Wilson Schaef's description of the "four great myths of the white male system," illustrates how women's language, and women's reality responds to the essentialist presuppositions of "phallocentricism." Schaef observes that the "White male system" assumes that it "*is the only thing that exists,...is innately superior, knows and understands everything*," and that "*it is possible to be totally logical, rationai, and objective*" (1985, pp. 7-10). All of these elements of the "White Male System" are also exemplified by essentialist epistemology as it has been articulated in Western culture. Schaef presents her position as a critical analyst of this "system", and illustrates the assumptive grounds of the "Female System" when she explains: "I have described the White Male system as it is perceived by Female System women. Similarly, there is a Female System. It is not good or bad. It just is. It is not necessary to choose one system over the other" (p. 7).

In contemporary literary criticism, deconstruction offers a critical perspective which calls into question the privileged status of philosophical texts. Norris writes that deconstruction "is first and last a textual activity, a putting into question of the root metaphysical prejudice which posits self-identical concepts outside and above the disseminating play of language" (1983, p. 6). Deconstruction confronts the assumptions of what Lanham refers to as *serious* reality by placing philosophical discourse squarely within the realm of rhetoric, and exploring "the transformative potential of treating texts as *undecidedly* situated between 'literature', 'criticism' and philosophy" (p. 6). What Norris refers to at the "deconstructive turn" illustrates the calling into question of privileged discourses that typify the rhetorical strategies of contemporary black thinkers and feminist theorists.

Davis and Schleifer illustrate how this 'deconstructive turn' has called into question the assumptive grounds of literary critical discourse, and its essentialist presuppositions:

> Literary studies in the United States have undergone a radical transformation in the last twenty five years from the almost total hegemony of New Criticism, with its privileging of the "autonomous" literary work and close reading of particular literary texts, to an explosion of interest in interdisciplinary approaches to literature. This major shift has overwhelmed the academic study of

> literature and raised the most fundamental questions concerning the nature of the literary "work," the generation of meaning in language and literature, and the nature of literary response (1985, p. vii.).

The centrality of language in contemporary critical discourse illustrates a paradoxical problematic that undergirds the historical debate between rhetoric and philosophy: to what extent do the participants in that debate reify its theoretical and practical manifestations through dialectical, argumentative discourse? The re-emergence of the primacy of language in radical critical studies confronts critics of race, gender and literature with the very real possibility that they have at some level participated in the creation of the realities of racism, sexism, and logocentricism.

Complicity with hegemonic discourses manifests itself in terms of an adherence to the assumptions inherent in the discourse itself. R. Radhankrishnan makes the point powerfully clear in "Ethnic Identity and Post Structuralist Difference:" "The assumption that there exists an essence (African, Indian, feminine, nature, etc,) ironically perpetuates the same ahistoricism that was identified as the enemy during the negative/critical or 'deconstructive' phase of the ethnic revolution." Radhankrishnan then asks the question most central to the problem of complicity at the linguistic level: "Doesn't this all sound somehow familiar: the defeat and overthrow of one sovereignty, the emergence and consolidation of an antithetical sovereignty, and the creation of a different, yet the same, repression?" (1987, p. 208). The answer to this question is must be considered by critics of race, gender and language sincerely committed to transcending and reconstructing the hegemonic dialectic. Such a consideration, I believe, begins with an exploration of the essentialist presuppositions of the language of criticism, our complicity in that language, and how it influences the social realities which we generate with it.

Stanback and Pearce indicate the role of complicity in the construction of social reality in terms of race relations. "Even groups pledged to tolerate exotic customs and divergent beliefs usually form a hierarchical pecking order when they must interact regularly with other groups. If everyone involved 'agrees' about which groups are dominant and which inferior, a stable social reality is created in which each individual knows how to communicate with persons from other groups" (1981, p. 21). Although Stanback and Pearce deal with this "agreement" in terms of specific strategies used by blacks when

talking with whites, it can also be extended to a general discussion of the role of language in socially constructed realities.

Bell Hooks' observation recognizes the significance of the issue for feminist studies: "Women must begin the work of feminist reorganization with the understanding that we have all (irrespective of race, sex, or class) acted in complicity with the existing oppressive system. We all need to make a conscious break with the system....We cannot motivate [other women] to join a feminist struggle by asserting a political superiority that makes the movement just another oppressive hierarchy" (1984, pp. 161-162). Hooks suggests that feminism contains within it the possibility of perpetuating the same type of privileges legitimated by the hegemonic discourse of the "oppressive" system from which it must break, and argues for a recognition of complicity as a first step in transcending that possibility.

Terry Eagleton points to the self-legitimating nature of essentialism in education in general, and criticism in particular, when he argues that "In any academic study we select the objects and methods of procedure which we believe the most important, and our assessment of their importance is governed by frames of interest deeply rooted in our practical forms of social life" (1983, p. 211). The prevailing essentialist paradigm protects its privilege by purporting to reflect "serious" reality, and seeing opposing points of view as "rhetorical." Eagleton continues: "Radical critics are no different in this respect: it is just that they have a set of social priorities with which most people at present ted to disagree. This is why they are commonly dismissed as 'ideological', because 'ideology' is always a way of describing other people's interests rather than one's own" (p. 211). While Eagleton clearly takes sides with "radical" critics, he illustrates the problematic of complicity by pointing out that even these critics participate in privileged discourses.

This same notion is amplified by Barbara Christian's contention that many "critics do not investigate the reasons why that statement--literature is political--is now acceptable when before it was not; nor do we look to our own antecedents for the sophisticated arguments upon which we can build in order to change the tendency of any established Western idea to become hegemonic" (1987, p. 55). One way to facilitate the type of change that Christian and many other critics of race and gender are attempting is to recognize that our complicity with hegemonic discourse begins with the very language we use to call that discourse into question: critical, argumentative language. I believe Christian's observations that "the new emphasis on literary critical theory is as hegemonic as the world which it

attacks," and that "the language it creates as one which mystifies rather than clarifies out condition, making it possible for a few people who know that particular language to control the critical scene" (p. 55), must be extended to a general discussion of the epistemological presuppositions of argumentative language.

TOWARD A RHETORIC OF DEFINITION: RECONSTRUCTING THE DIALECTIC OF NEGATIVE DIFFERENCE

The underlying principle of essentialism is the principle of negative difference, which is central to argumentation and critical discourse, and thus a basic element of our linguistic and symbolic interaction. This raises an important theoretical question which confronts scholars in women's studies, communication, and contemporary black thought: to what extent are non-dominant population groups, through their participation in the prevailing essentialist linguistic systems, complicitous in constructing 'oppressive' social realities? As critics we are confronted by an important epistemological dilemma, in the sense that breaking with the system is reifying the system in its most basic form: negation. This paradox points to the underlying problematic of complicity.

To the extent that we all participate in discourse, practical and theoretical, presupposed by essentialist assumptions, we participate in the construction of oppressive social realities. This becomes problematical, and yet extremely challenging, when we acknowledge that the process of criticism itself, whether social, cultural, or literary, is undergirded and legitimated by essentialist assumptions of knowing and being. As scholars and social critics we are privileged by ontological and epistemological principles of negative difference which we readily use to participate in the argumentative and agonistic symbolic systems that sustain and perpetuate the hegemonic dialectic.

Gates comments on the problematic when he considers the "belief in an essence called 'blackness'" which accompanied contemporary criticism of Afro-American literature. "As healthy politically as such a gesture was, as revealing as it was...of the very arbitrariness of the received sign of blackness itself, we must also criticize the idealism, the notion of essence, implicit even in this gesture. To think oneself free simply because one can claim--can utter-- the negation of an assertion is not to think deeply enough" (p. 7). The agonistic approach to critical inquiry pursued by many afrocentric critics failed to come to grips with the underlying

problematic characterizing race relations, both within and outside of literary circles. Thus the languages of criticism often perpetuated the very problematic they hoped to transcend.

Christian confronts the same problematic in black feminist literary criticism. "Since I can count on one hand the number of black feminist literary critics in the world today, I consider it presumptuous of me to invent a theory of how we *ought* to read" (p. 53). Christian, in her critique of french feminism illustrates how critical discourse, ostensibly aimed at transcending the hegemonic dialectic, reifies it: "What I am concerned about is the authority this school now has in feminist scholarship--the way it has become authoritative discourse, monologic, which occurs precisely because it does have access to the means of promulgating its ideas" (p. 60). In terms of contemporary criticism, it would seem, the problem of hegemonic discourse goes beyond race, gender, and perhaps even language, and thrives in the assumptive foundations which circumscribe all three: epistemology.

Michael Awkward concurs, and returns us to the junction of race, gender and language in his discussion of the essentialist presuppositions of justificatory positions taken by contemporary black and feminist literary critics concerning cross-gender/racial critical abilities. Using principles of psychoanalytic criticism he responds to the assertion that men are incapable of doing "feminist" criticism, and compares the assertion to the arguments presented by black critics during the 1960 regarding the abilities of whites to analyze Afro-american literature. "What psychoanalytic theory enables," he writes, "is a deconstruction of traditional feminist criticism's problematic appeals to an authority of female experience, and exposure, in legal terms, of the neither biologically or culturally justified nature of feminist criticism's practice of a whole reverse discrimination. To simply reverse the binary opposition man/woman, when we are painfully aware of its phallocentric origins, is to suggest complicity with the male-authored fiction of history. No feminist should be comfortable with such a suggestion, despite the potential institutional gains" (1987, p. 23).

No critic, I would argue, should be comfortable with such a simple reversal of the binary opposition which criticism so eloquently calls into question, and yet, within the context of essentialist epistemology, critical discourse is often limited to perpetuating just this type of dialectical binary opposition. Criticism, whether or not it calls into question privileged discourse, *is itself a privileged discourse, and thus must strive to perpetuate one position at the expense of another.* This is the rhetoric of "serious" reality, the

rhetoric of critical discourse, and its implications cannot simply be dismissed. Radhankrishnan concurs: "Could it not be the case that we are either flogging a dead horse or that our interest is not in achieving a 'break', but in the eternal and timeless maintenance of a 'tradition of opposition' that has perforce to keep alive the very tradition it questions?" (1988, p. 201).

If criticism is to be radical in terms of its own presuppositions, it must look to its own assumptive ground for an epistemic stance that transcends the tradition of opposition of which Radhankrishnan speaks. "The task for radical ethnicity is to thematize and subsequently problematize its entrapment with these binary elaborations with the intention of 'stepping beyond' to find its own adequate language" (1987, p. 216). In order to step beyond the binarity of essentialism, I believe it is necessary step into it: that is, to confront it on its own terms, in its own language, to call into question the necessity of negation by legitimating it through affirmation. Such a paradoxical approach places us squarely in the realm of rhetoric.

"The rhetorical view of life," writes Richard Lanham, "begins with the centrality of language" (p. 4). The importance of this observation to contemporary considerations of race, gender and language cannot be overemphasized, for it provides a point of departure for the conceptualization of an actively non-argumentative approach to discourse. The necessity of such an approach has been considered by writers in black communication, women's language studies, and rhetoric, yet few writers have addressed the underlying epistemological problematic which must be addressed in constructing such a discourse. In order to explicate the possibility of actively non-argumentative discourse, we must, as Lanham suggests, "rehearse again the quarrel between philosophy and rhetoric," (p. 35). The rhetorical view of life calls the essentialist assumptions of serious reality into question, and yet at the same time offers the possibility of recognizing the legitimacy of that reality:

> The rhetorical view thus stands fundamentally opposed to to the West's bad conscience about language, revels in what Roland Barthes (in 'Science vs. Literature") has called the "Eros of Language." Homo Rhetoricus cannot, to sum it up, be serious. He is not pledged to a single set of values and the cosmic orchestration they adumbrate. He is not, like the serious man, alienated from his own language. And if he relinquishes the luxury of a

> central self, a soul, he gains the tolerance, and usually the sense of humor, that comes from knowing he--and others--not only may *think* differently, but may *be* differently (p. 5).

Unlike serious reality, which would do away with rhetoric, rhetorical reality through its recognition of the complementary nature of opposites, can accept serious reality. Rhetoric thus provides a vehicle for transcending the essentialist discourse of negative difference which begins and ends with the illusion of identity and separateness that is at the heart of serious reality.

Rhetoric, notes Lanham, "offered a training in tolerance, if by that we mean getting inside another's skull and looking out," and taught perhaps the most important lesson of being human: forgiveness. "For what is forgiveness but the acknowledgement that the sinner sinning is not truly himself, plays but a misguided role? If always truly ourselves, which of us shall scape hanging?" (pp. 7 & 8). The rhetoric of which Lanham speaks seems peculiarly different than the traditional view rhetoric which we have inherited, defined by philosophy and limited to the "forms and mannerisms" of persuasive discourse. This view, Lanham suggests, is in opposition to the actual practice of rhetoric, and that opposition "goes far to explain the two persistently puzzling facts about the history of rhetoric: why it has been so deplored and why it has so endured" (p. 5). Philosophy for centuries has denigrated rhetoric, I would argue, in a fashion similar to how Europeans have denigrated Africans, and how men have denigrated women, through critical discourses that have focused on, and reified, *essential* differences. "Such criticism" writes Lanham, "points to differences so fundamental they indicate a wholly different way of looking at the world" (p. 5).

Certainly, this is what contemporary critics in race, gender and language studies are suggesting, and many have focused the reconstruction of rhetoric on articulating afrocentric, female, and non-persuasive linguistic strategies. Arthur Smith (Molefi Asante) suggests that "*Rhetoric as concept is foreign to the traditional African ethos,*" primarily because of its emphasis on persuasion (1974, p. 139). Sally Miller Gearheart in "The Womanization of Rhetoric" equates rhetoric as persuasion with violence. "My indictment of our discipline of rhetoric springs from my belief that any intent to persuade is an act of violence" (1979, p. 195). Young, Becker and Pike have pointed to the importance of Rogerian rhetoric as an alternative to persuasive discourse, and echo Gearheart's concerns by observing that "users of this strategy deliberately avoid conventional

persuasive structures and techniques because these devices tend to produce a sense of threat," which is precisely what users are trying to avoid" (1970, p. 275).

In order to understand this concern with persuasion we must "rehearse the quarrel between philosophy and rhetoric" beginning with the Platonic dialogue *Gorgias.* In this dialogue, Socrates questions Gorgias and his two students Callicles and Polus, and induces them to admit that rhetoric has to do with persuasion. Using dialectic, the question and answer method of philosophy which emphasizes definition, and through which an understanding of "true" reality can be achieved, Socrates questions Gorgias until he admits that rhetoric is "a creator of persuasion." At this point Socrates goes on to argue that rhetoric is in fact not an art, but a mere set of techniques used to pander to an audience, and this argument has shaped definitions of rhetoric ever since.

However, it seems unlikely that Gorgias would have defined rhetoric as persuasion when he stated in the *Encomium on Helen* that "persuasion by speech is equivalent to abduction by force" (Freeman, 1977, p. 132). Gorgias, who readily admitted to being a teacher of rhetoric, called into question the Platonic assertion of the primacy of dialectic, and this is the basis of Socrates' attack on rhetoric. Robert Pirsig in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance concurs*: "Socrates is not using dialectic to understand rhetoric, he is using it to destroy it, or at least to bring it into disrepute, and so his questions are not real questions at all--they are word traps which Gorgias and his fellow rhetoricians fall into" (p. 333). Pirsig sees the debate between philosophy and rhetoric in terms of the conflict between "classical" and "romantic" reality, and arrives at a conclusion similar to Lanham's: "What you have here is a conflict of *visions of reality*" (p. 49).

Pirsig's character "Phaedrus" counters the definition of rhetoric as persuasion with the concept of rhetoric as quality, and in his discussion of the "classic-romantic dichotomy" point out the underlying logic which separates the two: "Persons tend to think and feel exclusively in one mode or the other and in doing so tend to misunderstand and underestimate what the other mode is all about. But no one is willing to give up the truth as he sees it," observes Pirsig (p. 62). Pirsig's insights touch on the problem of complicity in terms of the agreement to disagree, which points toward the importance of the philosophical definition of rhetoric as persuasion. When viewed as persuasion, rhetoric is used to impart the knowledge of a pre-existent reality, one arrived at through dialectical attenuation and understanding. This is the

conceptualization of rhetoric which we have inherited from Aristotle, who defined rhetoric as "the faculty of discovering in the particular case the available means of persuasion," and conceptualized it as "the counterpart of dialectic." It is also the definition of rhetoric articulated in the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus*.

The *Phaedrus* seems initially to be a reversal of Socrates' earlier condemnation of rhetoric, but actually it is an explanation of the hierarchical relationship between rhetoric, dialectic, and knowledge. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates suggests that rhetoric can be an art of persuasion, but only when used by the dialecticians, who alone have an understanding of 'true' reality. Socrates equates dialectic with love, and argues that the dialectician understands the true nature of human souls, and uses rhetoric accordingly to lead each soul toward the light of truth. The philosopher, who is the consummate dialectician, is the guardian of the knowledge of "true" reality, that is arrived at through the process of definition, and which distinguishes things in terms of their 'natures.' This is the underlying logic of essentialist epistemology, or "serious" reality, and it attempts to free us from rhetoric in the same way that the Socratic charioteer attempts to free us from the "dark horse" of the soul which would lead us from the singularity of "true" reality.

This "dark horse," is the same figure of negation which Gates and Whitson explicate, and it is at this juncture that the relationship between rhetoric, race and gender becomes quite clear. The rhetoric of contemporary race, gender, and literature, goes beyond a rhetoric of persuasion--one which reflects a pre-existent reality--and offers the possibility of *a rhetoric of definition*; one which defines and constructs reality along the lines of our choices. The debate between philosophy and rhetoric has two purposes closely aligned with those that circumscribe antagonisms of race and gender; first, to privilege one position at the expense of the other by constructing an arbitrary distinction between the two, and second, to reify the first position by using the second to legitimize the first as essentially real. Real reality--*White male serious* reality, must invent the inferior other in order to remain real, in order to survive. This is best achieved by using language to create the reality that language merely reflects reality, by using the power of the word to disempower the word, and by constructing an argumentative discourse that never applies its own principles to itself.

Criticism is that discourse, and to the extent that radical critics too engage in critique, and assert the existence of essential differences through that engagement, they participate in hegemonic discourse, and therein lay their complicity. Radical criticism cannot

escape that complicity as long as it attempts to "ignore the simple fact that no case can be argued, no proposition stated--however radical in its intent--without falling back on the conceptual resources vested in natural language. And that language is in turn shot through with all the anthropocentric 'metaphysical meanings which determine its very logic and intelligibility" (Norris, 1987, p. 22). In short, as long as critics participate in argumentative critical discourse, they are grounded in the very epistemological sensibility which they hope to transcend, are privileged by the theory of knowledge that, ostensibly, they are calling into question.

Perhaps, then, radical critics might consider a revolutionary epistemic turn which reconstructs the hierarchies of knowledge that facilitate and perpetuate argumentative critical discourse. Both argument and criticism are grounded in the assumption that some positions are better, superior, or more accurate than others, an assumption which precludes a truly democratized discourse. These assumption are presupposed by an almost axiomatic belief that there is some singularly correct way to measure the quality or validity of each position that exists outside of the positions themselves, which is self-evident. This is the basis of essentialist epistemology, and it posits a reality of separate and distinct entities that exist apart from each other. Those positions which call such a reality into question--and certainly the positions of critical theorist of race, gender and language are among these--are indicted by essentialists as being "relativistic," and dismissed on the basis of a set of truth claims that are self-legitimating and self-privileging.

Yet "relativism" points to the underlying problematic of essentialism: that there is no way to prove or disprove the existence of essential reality that is not self referential, and self-legitimizing. Relativism only becomes problematical when viewed from an essentialist perspective, or constructed in terms of essentialist presuppositions of knowledge. The position that all knowledge is relative is itself an essentialist position, in that it posits a singular state of being that is self evident as the ground of that which is real. The resolution of the problematic of essentialism and relativism is grounded in the rhetorical recognition of "alternative possibilities," of the complementary nature of opposites. Hegemonic discourse is sustained and perpetuated by the belief that essentialism and relativism are in fact separate and distinct modes of being; a radical critical perspective might call this assumption into question by positing that they are intimately interrelated, are part and parcel of each other.

Such a perspective is inherent in an epistemic stance which posits "a being for whom all truths are evident, but also, that each of us is identical with that being, and therefore with each other. This, in its essentials, is what I take to be the theory of reality underlying what has been called the 'coherence theory of truth'" (Chisolm, 1966, p. 113). Such an epistemic stance is congruent with the assumptions of language advanced by contemporary theorists in race, gender, and rhetorical criticism, and points to a set of assumptions that facilitate a reconstruction of the hegemonic dialectic that transcends the discourse of negative difference. It is an epistemic stance which reconstructs self evidence by positing a reality of "things," which incorporates and transcends the essentialist conceptualization of reality as "thing", and resolves the problem of negative difference by assuming a common ground of being(s). It is an epistemic stance emerging today in response to the crisis of epistemology that bridges fields of inquiry as seemingly disparate as religion and physics.

This is the epistemic stance invoked by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. in "Letter from Birmingham Jail:" "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly" (p. 14). Physicist David Bohm, in *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, provides a similar perspective in his discussion of the impact of essentialist epistemology on human action and interaction. He notes that "society as a whole has developed in such a way, that it is broken up into separate nations and different religious, political, economic, racial groups, etc...The notion that all these fragments are separately existent is evidently an illusion, and this illusion cannot do other than lead to endless conflict and confusion" (1980, pp. 2, 3). Essentialism has persuaded us that we are indeed separate and distinct entities, and this belief has enabled us to create systems of symbolic interaction which reify and perpetuate this reality.

The reality of this belief is perhaps best articulated in the linguistic realm of unreality, of fiction. Tish, the heroine of James Baldwin's novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* confronts the reality of negative difference, the complicity it engenders, and its impact on our language. "It's astounding the first time you realize a stranger has a body--the realization that he has a body makes him a stranger. It means you have a body too. You will live with this forever, and it will spell out the language of your life" (pp. 64-65). Although Tish lives in a fictive world, her insight are very real. The belief in separateness has, indeed, made us strangers, and has created a language of negative difference. A rhetoric of definition will enable us, like Baldwin, to begin to give voice to that element of the other

that is within each of us, and experience the tolerance and forgiveness that is an essential aspect of the rhetorical ideal of life.

Perhaps then the problems negative difference--of the other as stranger--that characterize the social realities of race, gender and language will be seen as problems of knowledge, or more precisely, of human consciousness. The sociological realities of race, gender, and language, are deeply rooted in human consciousness and its classificatory and symbolic systems. A reconstruction of the insights of Kress and Hodge suggests directions directions for further theory and practice. "The basic system of classification is itself abstract, and isn't manifest until it is made actual by human agents engaged in social interaction. This abstract character is its source of strength, in that the system itself is never scrutinized, so it not usually open to criticism' weakness, because it is constantly being subtly renegotiated by individuals who are responding to forces outside the language system. Classification only exists in discourse, and discourse is always at risk" (p. 64). Rhetoric allows us to call discourse into question, and a rhetoric of definition will allow us to renegotiate the risks of interaction, and perhaps transform our classificatory systems so that we might emphasize similarity and affirmation.

In constructing a rhetoric of definition, we need to recognize the complicity which is created by negation, both in symbolic and social interaction. As Kress and Hodge observe, "Negatives can create a universe of alternative meanings, which the speaker formally renounces but which exist as a result of his renunciation. His relationship to his meaning is peculiarly ambivalent" (p. 145). As we begin to scrutinize, re-vision, and reconstruct our classificatory systems, we will find forces within the language that will formulate an actively non-argumentative discourse, one devoid of domination, one which can transcend the hegemonic dialectic, and one which in it affirmative approach to language, thought and action, will be both radical and revolutionary.

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